

There's something about Mary

BOOOOOOM! LOW-FREQUENCY rumbling vibrations vibrate through my sternum. It's an odd feeling, not actually unpleasant – but not exactly enjoyable. A bit like the bass rumble on a loud dance-floor, but more exhilarating for the fact that I'm 30m deep, in blue water.

I'm hanging out with a huge school of giant trevally off the edge of the remote, and uninhabited, Mary Island. There's not a disco in sight – for about 150 miles.

What there is, however, far more exciting than a Solomon Islands night spot (of which there are few), is Kavachi.

A submarine volcano! It might be 40 miles away, but it's going off. Like a series of distant explosions crossed with rumbling thunder, I can hear only the noise beneath the waves – but given the effect here, it must be ear-splitting up close.

I'm nearing the end of my dive, but there have already been some top sightings. The huge thousands-strong school of 60cm-long bigeye trevally is reason in itself to visit this spot.

It's a shimmering silver mass that shifts and pours in ribbons over the reef, only to ball up again in another spot. Approach slowly and you can be enveloped by it.

But that's just one of Mary's attractions – the island seems to be a gathering place with an interesting cast of characters.

There's a bit of current running – nothing extreme, but hooking on means that you can watch the world go. Big dogtooth tuna are a real treat, making appearances on almost every dive, and then there are a few grey reef sharks about in the blue, medium-size schools of barracuda and also something I

haven't seen elsewhere – a school of juvenile grey reefs, each just a metre or so long.

At first there are only a few, but they seem to gather out of the gloom until I count upwards of 35 swimming together – making their way to the blue, just out from the wall.

Unhooking and rounding the corner of the reef, the booming is more intense, now facing Kavachi more directly. The trevally are up to something.

The school that was split previously on the reef has come together in one giant mass, and moved out into the blue, down-current of the island. Fish are

splitting off in pairs, one silver, one now temporarily black – a remarkable transformation.

They're clearly thinking about spawning. Swimming with them against the flow is draining my tank, so I fight my way back against the current to the reef for a safety stop before surfacing. I'd like to have stayed, but I do get one last treat. Back at the reef the surgeonfish are also spawning, streaking several metres up from the coral before letting out a plume of milt.

Other fish dart in to make the most of the event, and midnight snapper Hoover up the milky clouds – revealing why the jack went offshore and downcurrent.

All in all it's a great dive, and Mary Island captures what the Solomons is all about.

There's a slightly prehistoric Lost World feel here, where you can expect the unexpected.

With more than 900 islands, many of them not inhabited, only two liveaboards and a few land-

based operators scattered about, it's a place of intrigue, ripe to explore.

But, apart from pounding volcanoes and giant schools of silver fish, what else do the Solomon Islands offer? Well, the answer is just about everything...



Hooked on the islands



Reefs, wrecks and raging currents – this Pacific destination has left a deep impression on **ELLEN HUSAIN**



Heart of the Coral Triangle

The Solomons lie in the eastern corner of the Coral Triangle, the worldwide centre for coral biodiversity. They are north-east of Australia, east of PNG and north-west of Vanuatu. There are six main islands, but more than 900 smaller ones, some inhabited, some not.

Here are some of the best displays of hard corals I've seen. Untouched by the recent bleaching of nearby Australia and elsewhere, species of all different forms and colours sit one next to another in an amazing display of niche diversification.

One dive in the Russell Islands reveals incredible vistas of healthy staghorns, and excited divers returning to deck unilaterally describe the "rolling green hills of acropora".

Munda, too, has impressive shallow reefs at Bigo Bigo with myriad colours and forms topping coral canyons in 0-5m of water. You could spend hours on one tank, bewitched in the dancing light. As

a former coral-reef scientist this obviously floats my boat, and on surfacing we decide simply to dive the same spot again.

Wreckie paradise

Wrecks are not usually my thing. I prefer the life that lives on and around them to the structures themselves.

However, from planes to submarines and warships, the Solomons has such a variety of interesting and different craft, often in readily identifiable form – that even I was quite taken.

The Solomon Islands were the site of WW2's infamous 1942-43 Battle of Guadalcanal, when so many craft were sunk that the neighbouring seaway is named Iron Bottom Sound.

With 200 ships and more than 600 aircraft littering the seabed, it's safe to say that if you're one for rust then you've come to the right place.

For serious technical divers there are some world-class wrecks, with the *Aaron Ward* in 70m said to be bristling with



Above left: Emerging into the jungle at Mirror Pool in the Russell Islands.

Above: Bigeye jack pour over the reef at Mary Island.

Below left: Lionfish are frequently seen around Uepi Island's bright red seafans.

Below: B343 American Grumman F6F Hellcat fighter plane *Betsy II*, downed on January 1943 near Gizo.

amoury, or the *USS Atlanta*, serious stuff at 95m-plus. But for the more recreational types there is still a heap of options, from the two incredibly accessible wrecks at the steeply sloping Bonegi Beach – just a 30-minute drive from the nation's capital.

Imaginatively referred to as Bonegi 1 and Bonegi 2, one of them (1 or 2?) actually breaks the water's surface, just metres from the tide line.

Lying in 5-35m of water it's perfect for diving or snorkelling, and has a lot of life around the upper deck and hold.

Perhaps more novel, however, are the various downed aircraft, many of which, seemingly miraculously, sit upright and fairly intact on the seabed.

There is something impressive about a plane under water, and in the Solomons they come in all shapes and sizes, from a





that you see under water, as well as anti-aircraft guns, tanks and memorabilia rescued from the jungles of the island.

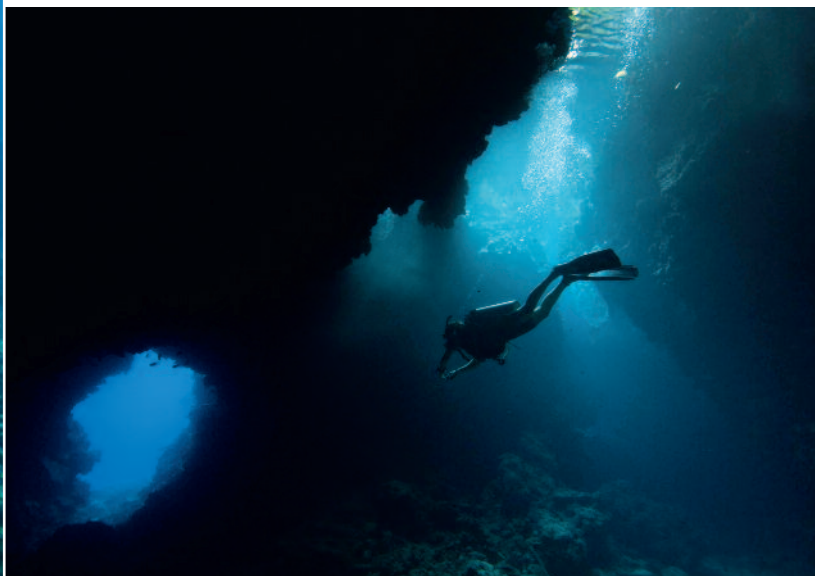
Sharks & megafauna

I'll be completely honest here – there are better places for megafauna. That said, there are a fair few sharks around, and spots where you can reliably see them.

Upei Island in the Marovo lagoon is an amazing place to stay, and you're pretty much guaranteed to see sharks while you're there. The passage on which the island is situated has a lot of action, with local grey reefs, and I saw a hammerhead on my first dive of the visit.

There are also plentiful blacktips that hang out near their dock, and big schools of fish.

Munda is also well-known for the chance to see hammerheads, in season, and Shark Point had some of the best vis I saw during my whole trip, with larger fish like napoleons and schools of bumphead parrotfish – one of my favourite fish.



Catalina flying boat and an American B17 Flying Fortress bomber to the surprisingly diminutive Mitsubishi Zeros and Hellcats.

Many are in readily accessible depths, outside of Guadalcanal and Tulaghi. Munda has a large variety, but wherever you dive there are usually wrecks about.

The P38 lies disconcertingly just off the end of the Seghe airstrip. Vis is not the best there, and there may be a current running, but the single-seater WW2 fighter is shallow and has an incredible vivid array of soft corals under its wings – take a torch or strobe, or you won't get the effect.

For those interested in the war there is also an open-air WW2 "museum" on Guadalcanal. There you can see dry versions of several of the crashed planes

Above right: Bigo Bigo shallows in Munda – "so good they named it twice", as they say there. The name means rainbow in the local language, and the corals certainly are colourful.

Below right: Exploring the canyons and caverns of the Russell Islands.

Caves, caverns & cuts

One thing the Solomons does really well is topography. With lots of uplifted limestone, many of the island cliffs are riddled with cuts, caves, and coral canyons. This makes for some really beautiful diving, and some fun passages and swim-throughs.

Of all of them Leru Cut is the most famous – and for good reason. A vertical fissure extending above and below the surface that runs 50m back into the island, you swim in at 10m and surface at the end in a chamber open to the air, glimpsing the distant sky above.

That's fun, but what makes it great is the light. The floor of the cut is of fine white sand, and looking back towards the entrance divers are silhouetted against the dazzling shafts of glowing blue light that signal the entrance. With the top of the cut always open to the air, it's an easy but very beautiful dive.

Aside from the Cut there are a heap of other caverns and caves. Mirror Pool is



SOME SOLOMON ISLANDS DIVE-PROVIDERS

Bilikiki

Plying the waters for nearly 30 years, the *Bilikiki* is the Solomon Island's most established liveaboard, and something of an institution. She has a charm of her own. Distributing seeds and buying back vegetables from villages *en route* means there's always fresh produce onboard, and she receives a warm welcome from flotillas of local canoes wherever she sails. With signature sites accessible only by boat, the itinerary is packed with variety, and great hosts mean that the boat is efficiently run & well set-up for photographers.

www.bilikiki.com

SIDE

Solomon Islands Dive Expeditions (SIDE) is the newest operation on the dive scene. The crew are young, mostly Australian. Again, SIDE visits

otherwise inaccessible sites in far-flung locations, and will choose them based on the abilities of the group. Many are tried and tested but some can be exploratory. With talk of bigger, more "expedition-style" trips, if adventure is your thing, watch that space!

www.solomonsdiving.com

Tulagi Dive

Tulagi Dive is based in the capital, Honiara. It dives Iron Bottom Sound's numerous wrecks from the Bonegis to the *Aaron Ward*, as well as sites such as the lava tubes at Tulagi's Twin Tunnels. Neil Yates and Troy are both seriously into the technical side of life, so for serious deep wreck dives they're your men. They also offer dive certification, and are the perfect operation if you just want to do a few dives before heading off to the outer islands.

www.tulagidive.com

Dive Munda

Belinda who runs Dive Munda is really fun, and one of the most enthusiastic people I've ever met. There are a whole range of dives around Munda, and partnering with Agnes Lodge makes a great affordable base, offering planes, stunning reefs and pelagics – and the best vis during my stay.

www.mundadive.com

Dive Gizo

Dive Gizo also has a range of sites, from a shallow US Hellcat plane to walls, garden eels and corals. There are accommodation options in Gizo town, or Dive Gizo will pick you up from the beautiful Fatboys Resort – just 10 minutes by boat. For non-divers Fatboys also has great shallow snorkelling in the extensive lagoon.

divegizo.com

Uepi Island Resort

Established for 30 years by Grant and Jill Kelly, Uepi Island is a lovely place to stay with a brilliant sustainable ethos, as well as having fantastic diving. Situated next to a pass in the huge and spectacular Marovo Lagoon, sites are typically very close to the Uepi dock – just five or 10 minutes by skiff (or you can dive right from the dock). Large schools of fish, sharks, rays and sometimes mantas can be seen. Uepi also does some brilliant day-trips – the *Taiyo* wreck/Penguin Reef /Babata sinkhole trip is highly recommended. Uepi is probably the best place for anyone wanting to spend time with a partner and still do a couple of dives a day. The island is picture-postcard, with walks and lots of birds and wildlife, and there is excellent snorkelling in the pass.

www.uepi.com

a swim-through that opens to a shallow pool in the jungle – sometimes with a resident croc. Sadly he wasn't home when I dived it (or if he saw us we didn't see him), but it's a beautiful spot nonetheless. If the water's undisturbed you can look up through Snell's Window at the trees above.

Other sites include the Kastom Cave, an impressive deeper cave in the Russells, which again allows you to surface in the jungle, but this time through a shimmering halocline of fresh water.

Munda is famous for its signature dive, the Cave of the Kastom Shark, which starts in the jungle pool and emerges through a narrow downward tunnel to a wall and blue water, at around 35m.

What else?

Currents! With more than 900 islands, changing tides set up some pretty strong flows. Depending where you dive and who you dive with there are some pretty impressive currents.

Most of the operators will have reef hooks, which you can borrow or buy, and hooking on to a wall is a great way to see some of the best fish action – just as long as you keep your mask on.

All the operators will plan dives according to divers' needs, so don't be concerned if you'd prefer a more sedate experience, because there are plenty of relaxed potterings to be had too.

Other Solomons highlights include

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly to Brisbane via Singapore and on from there to the capital, Honiara. Solomon Airlines flies several times a week and can also provide internal flights.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ See panel above.

WHEN TO GO ▶ The Solomons are hot and humid, with air temperatures usually around 30°. The heaviest rainfall is supposed to be from December to March but the weather patterns can vary. July to September are said to be the best months to visit.

CURRENCY ▶ Solomon Islands dollar (SBD)

LANGUAGE ▶ There are 70 – officially it's English but the main common language is Solomons Pijin.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from the UK cost around £1340. Hotels in Honiara cost £80-220 a night, guest-houses around £45. Island resorts vary from home stays at around £25 and basic lodges at £50, to higher-end resorts at £100 and up. Seven-night trips on *Bilikiki* cost US \$3640pp (two sharing).

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ www.visitsolomons.com.sb

pygmy seahorses – *Hippocampus denise* and *bargibanti* are regularly seen, along with ghost pipefish, mangroves, massive seafans and soft corals.

The Solomons offer incredibly diverse diving opportunities. Visibility is usually good, but don't always expect the clear oceanic vis of some other places. It's also a nudibranch fancier's heaven, and macro subjects such as orangutan crabs and ornate ghost pipefish are there if you take



Above: Divers return to the *Bilikiki* after visiting an island village in the huge Marovo lagoon.

time to find them – or use a good guide.

On land, the Solomons has fascinating culture. Outside of three main town-sized "cities" it's mostly small island villages living subsistence lifestyles, with that feeling of stepping back in time.

The wood carving is exceptional – with lots of pieces inspired by sea life, it's worth saving some space in your suitcase for that memento from your trip to the wilder side of the Pacific.